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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: COUNTERING RISING ANTI-USG SENTIMENTS

1. (SBU) Summary. Widely publicized allegations of USG abuse of Muslim prisoners and the Koran have aggravated strong anti-USG attitudes in Bangladesh. Although less intense than in many Muslim countries, negative attitudes about the USG in this historically friendly country permeate virtually all social sectors. See paras 5-7 for current and proposed outreach efforts. End Summary.

New Fuel on the Fire

2. (SBU) Anti-USG sentiments in Bangladesh peaked during the war in Iraq, when even liberal elites opposed the use of force to evict Saddam Hussein. The media were uniformly negative. The editor of one generally pro-U.S. newspaper told us marketplace and social pressures forced him to join the anti-USG bandwagon. The publication of photos of Saddam in captivity was condemned as disrespectful to a former head of state and a violation of the Geneva Convention. Now, alleged USG abuse of the Koran triggered the biggest anti-USG demonstrations in Dhaka - up to 40,000 persons - since the Iraq war, with a coalition of Islamist groups promising the "mother of all rallies" on June 17.

3. (SBU) In March, the arrest and eventual deportation of an illegal 16-year-old Bangladeshi girl in New York for allegedly talking in a chat room about being a suicide bomber evoked widespread criticism. MFA objected to the arrest on "humanitarian" grounds, while Bangladeshis in general cited the action as an example of USG "paranoia" about Muslims and terrorism.

4. (SBU) Widespread ignorance and skepticism of USG policies and the way Americans treat Muslims provide a fertile breeding ground for anti-USG attitudes. The prevailing folklore heard in letters to the editor and many other fora includes:

A) "You can't get a student visa if your name is Mohammed."
- A Bangladeshi student at the American Center.

B) "If a woman wears a burqa, she won't get a visa." - A Bangladeshi who claimed this was why his aunt was denied a visa renewal after originally having been issued when she applied without a burqa.

C) "Americans lack morals and respect for their elders. They like to put old people into nursing homes." - Bangladeshi university instructor.

D) "American teenagers can do whatever they want and, once they turn 18, their parents push them out of the house;" and "American people live only for themselves and not for their families. They don't like other religions."
-- Bangladeshi university students at the American Studies Festival.

E) "Americans like to interfere with the internal affairs of other countries;" "the Bush Administration disregards its treaties;" and "America disregards institutions it created like the United Nations." -- Bangladeshi military officers at the National Defense College and the Bangladesh War College.

Reaching Out

5. (SBU) Our outreach program focuses on explaining USG policies and correcting false perceptions of American actions and attitudes. Recent highlights include:

A) The visit to Bangladesh of a U.S. Navy Muslim chaplain. His positive characterizations of Muslims in American society carried special credibility. After meeting with senior imams in Dhaka, one told us that the chaplain's Islam "was more pure because he chose to embrace Islam, whereas all the Bangladeshis around the table were born into it and took it for granted."

B) "America: The Real Story" is a PA presentation for prospective Bangladeshi students in the U.S., and others, that addresses common misperceptions about American society and in particular the condition of Muslims in post-9/11

America.

C) America Week in Khulna, the latest stop on the annual Embassy road show to district capitals to explain to, in this case, an estimated 15,000 visitors the breadth of USG activities, particularly on development, in Bangladesh.

D) An English language fellow is starting at the Madrassa Teacher Training Institute, and scholarships have been awarded to madrassa students to learn English and who use the American Center library as part of their program.

E) In connection with bilateral military training exercises, U.S. military units have undertaken school construction projects, provided medical treatment in villages, and conducted joint civil affairs training programs.

F) PA programmed Shehab Ahmed, a city councilor from Hamtramck, Michigan and the first elected Bangladeshi-American official, to speak in Dhaka and his native Sylhet about the American political system and his success as a Muslim in a majority non-Muslim constituency. His descriptions of local government authority and prerogatives resonated deeply in centralized Bangladesh, and his ability to communicate in Bangla made him our most successful speaker in the past two years.

G) AID is planning another tour for local journalists of AID-supported projects.

16. (SBU) Looking ahead, we need to accelerate the targeting of "younger, broader, deeper" audiences, and specifically to program more speakers, especially those who can speak credibly to Bangladeshi audiences about Muslim life in America and the actual situation in Afghanistan and Iraq. We look forward to the anticipated return this fall of the U.S. Navy Muslim chaplain and the visit in August of the Deputy Attorney General of New Jersey, a Bangladeshi-American woman. We are also pursuing an International Visitors Program for moderate Bangladeshi religious leaders.

17. (SBU) We are particularly concerned by the sharp decrease in the number of Bangladeshis studying in the U.S. since 9/11 due primarily to apprehensions about American attitudes towards Muslims. The UK, Canada, and especially Australia report sharply increased visa demand. We need initiatives and resources to reverse this trend.

18. (SBU) The steady growth in the number and impact of broadcast media is an important opportunity for mass outreach. In addition to enhancing placement and interviews with these channels, we need to enhance their journalistic professionalism.

Comment

19. (SBU) Anti-USG attitudes and activities are also a by-product of Bangladesh's increasingly assertive political Islam. Extremist Islamist groups that are becoming increasingly critical of the BDG and its main Islamist ally, Jamaat Islami, have jumped on Koran abuse allegations as a chance to flex their political muscle on an issue no BDG could challenge. An important adjunct of extremist Islam is innate suspicion of anything Western or non-Islamic. One MP told us that in his district imams have started telling Friday prayer sessions that Bangladesh is "in turmoil because of this Christian constitution we have. If we had God in our lives, there would be no problems. God can come only through a Sharia government."

110. (SBU) Therefore, there is a clear overlap between anti-USG attitudes and extremist Islamist perceptions. Both, however, pose important direct and indirect threats to core USG interests.

CHAMMAS